SERIOUS BUSINESS
Luke 4:25-33
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Is the bottom line a loyalty which, by any other measure, borders on the barbaric? Does God demand a devotion so total it is capable of destroying one's own child? Did Jesus seriously want a commitment so zealous it is capable of turning against parents, spouse, brothers, sisters? Or are these stories in the canon of the Bible simply to get our attention? Are they simply God's way of reminding us that what he has to do with us is very serious business?

It helps me to remember that the Bible was not written in the quiet solitude of a professor's study, nor by a cleric on summer vacation at the ocean. Rather, most of the Bible was written by people in crisis, by faithful men and women who had been reminded that faith can be very serious business, indeed, and who were in the process of paying dearly for their convictions.

The two texts today intrude on our Sunday morning peacefulness with their brutality. They make us uneasy. My guess is that you haven't heard many sermons or the harrowing story of Abraham and Isaac nor, for that matter, on Jesus' suggestion that following him implies hating one's parents...particularly on Stewardship Sunday.

I am preaching on those texts today, precisely because of their strange power. They jar me out of my comfortability. They remind one that what we are about is, in fact, very serious business.

It has been suggested that we would lock up any father today who acted like Abraham. It appears to be a barely civilized story, a relic of a barbaric past which practiced atrocities like human sacrifice. It has been suggested that the only possible reason for the inclusion of this story in scripture is to illustrate how far we have come in the historic evolution of religion. We would rightly curse a God who requires the death of a son just to prove a point. In fact, we would throw a man who acted like Abraham in jail. And if he insisted that he was simply doing what the voice of God was telling him to do we'd put him away in a mental hospital.

What does it mean, then? To answer we must look carefully at what it meant to Abraham. Isaac, after all, is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. Isaac is their future, the only future they have. Oriental cultures have always been more honest about the special immortality one enjoys through one's progeny. We enjoy it too, only more surreptitiously. But Isaac is all Abraham thinks he has. Isaac and his seed are the only hope that Abraham's life might have some lasting significance and not fade as quickly as his pipe-dream about Jahweh and a covenant and a mighty nation. One is tempted to speculate that Abraham is over-invested in this only son: that Isaac's potential significance as Abraham's immortality - may be interfering a bit with Abraham's ability to be himself with the lad - to love him and enjoy him and father him for what he is - namely his son.

In the most vivid terms possible - in a story so intensely human we can barely abide it, the Bible is suggesting that when we look for salvation - anywhere other than God - we are in trouble. When we expect anything to save us - give us meaning, significance, permanence, joy - other than God's grace - we are headed for trouble.

follow where God was leading. You know the story: they were elderly, childless, well-to-do, settled. And suddenly God tells them to let go of all of that; let go, pack up and move to a strange new place, where old Sarah will conceive and have a baby who will be the first of a mighty nation. One writer speculates about how the neighbors must have reacted to the hair-brained scheme: "Don't leave home! Enjoy! You've worked hard and done well! You're home safe. Don't throw it all away for a wild dream." (R. Raines, Going Home, p. 27)

"They left their nets and followed him," is the strikingly direct way the Gospel according to Mark describes Jesus' encounter with men who would become disciples: Simon, Andrew, James, John. He didn't query them as to their understanding of historic monotheism in relationship to the polytheistic cult of Rome. He didn't even ask about their morals. He simply summoned them to follow and the response was in the form, first, of letting go - of livelihood, job, camaraderie, way of life: letting go of every structure of meaning and security upon which their lives had been built.

Human sin, the theologians teach, is not so much doing bad things, committing ethical blunders as it is trying to build one's life, one's security, on the wrong foundation. Unlike the other living things in the created order, we know about our own mortality. You and I will never be as unselfconsciously free as the birds, the rabbits, the dogs. They are free of that which concerns us fundamentally. They think they'll live forever. They don't know any better, but we do. And so we hold tightly to whatever feels like security, permanance, safety. We squeeze, grasp, protect - whatever it is that seems to be an antidote to mortality: a person, a job, a stock portfolio, a reputation, a house. We hold on literally, for dear life until there is no strength in us, and more often than not the accumulated squeezing and holding has pressed the life and beauty and meaning out of whatever it is - the relationships, the reputation, the job. Nowhere do the ideas of faith and sin collide with such strength as here.

The dynamic pervades our lives. What is the most important thing your parents taught you? There is only one answer to that question. The most important thing parents teach children is how to be a person without them, how to stand alone, how to be - without parents. That's what parenting is about. Nothing is more critical than the way in which the person moves away from parental security, into the frightening world of independence, autonomy and wholeness. Bruno Bettleheim notes how frequently the motif turns up in the fantasy stories of children. And writes, "...being pushed out of the home stands for having to become oneself. Self-realization requires leaving the orbit of the home, an excruciatingly painful experience..." (The Uses of Enchantment, p. 79)

Philosopher Sam Keen underscores the point by observing that "letting go" is the essence of that developmental earthquake called adolescence, and laments that permissive parents shortcut the process by "refusing to be committed to any values against which young people might rebel." (The Passionate Life, p. 75) He writes: "To say a single 'yes', we must say 'no' a hundred times. The first and hardest 'no' is the decision to sever our ties with home, to endure the alienation that inevitably comes from leaving all that is familiar. Our temptation is to remain in safety, beyond tragedy. But if we do, all the delightful virtues of childhood will become twisted into independent vices. Instead of becoming responsible, we will be reactionary: instead of creative, conservative." (p. 62)

Did he mean that literally? I think the answer is implicit in the fact that he not only didn't hate his own family, but loved and cared for his mother and with his dying breath was providing for her. Of course he didn't mean that discipleship requires hatred for one's family. Part of the answer is literary. He used vivid language, dramatic hyperbole - here and elsewhere. He conjured up images of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle, of a two by four in a man's eye. It is a linguistic device which he used with great effectiveness.

What he meant, I believe, is not far from the intent of the Abraham-Isaac story; namely, that religious faith is ultimately a very personal matter, that Jesus Christ calls each of us to account as individuals: not in bunches, not in marriages, families, but as solitary people, Tom and Jane and Dick and Mary. Our parents, our spouses, our friends can't do our believing for us. Before God, we stand alone.

The people on the road to Jerusalem with him thought they were on their way to a coronation and fully expected him to claim his throne and become a royal victorious king. He had to tell them directly how wrong they were: that what was ahead was danger and sacrifice: that the faint of heart would not make it; that each would have to stand strongly alone. With great consistency Jesus told his friends that they would have to become new people; be converted; act and think differently. He asked them, for his own sake, and on his own authority, for everything.

When we preachers get up in our pulpits (on the first Sunday of November) and talk about stewardship we need to remember that while the church needs financial support in order to survive, the subject is not finally budgets and money and pledges - but discipleship, conversion, faithfulness. Stewardship is always about conversion, about the costly demands of faithfulness.

The danger is always that we will make it too easy on ourselves. Instead of conversion, the danger is that the preacher will be satisfied with an increase of 9.6%. Donald Messer, the distinguished President of Illif School of Theology, wrote recently that we have "made stewardship so safe and sanitary that the radical and revolutionary meaning of this key religious commitment has lost its transforming dynamic." (The Christian Ministry, 11/83, p. 16)

Messer thinks that one of the major problems of the modern church is that we don't ask nearly enough of ourselves. We assume that if we work gently at nurturing people in the faith they will commit more of themselves. Not true, Messer suggests. Rather, in faith, the act of commitment comes first, growth follows. The call to faith isn't to study and think about it for awhile, it is to follow Jesus Christ in a life of obedient faithfulness.

We are privileged Christians, not only by reason of our comfort and wealth, but primarily by reason of our freedom to believe or not to believe as we please. It has not always been so comfortable. it is not so pleasantly comfortable elsewhere in the world today. Christians in Central America, for instance, are struggling today with what it means to be faithful and how far they are willing to go to live out their faith. Archbishop Oscar Romero was murdered in San Salvador by one of the notorious Right Wing death squads which still operate in El Salvador. He was murdered because his discipleship to Jesus Christ motivated him to stand with the poor. And members of his flock are learning by terrible example about the cost of faithfulness.

S. Africa

Russia

We can expect the living Christ to continue to challenge the mentality which chooses to escalate the arms race to guarantee security - against the counsel of a multitude of experts who now see the futility of that. We should expect the spirit of the living Christ to challenge us - as our ~~House of Representatives~~ responds to uncertainty by funding ~~more~~ MX missiles ~~and the resumption, after 15 years, of the testing of nerve gas.~~

Thinking like that can get you in trouble. Ernest Campbell writes: "This is how Jesus got nailed to a cross. He lived in flagrant independence of all the principalities and powers. We keep clutching our Social Security cards, our pension plans, our bankbooks, our stocks. And we want to know why we are not free."

Those who followed him found new life, life deeper, richer, passionate, full. Those willing to let go found something in following him infinitely more precious than the old certainties. So the summons, the call, comes to each of us, not necessarily in a blinding flash of light, or cataclysmic emotional upheaval - but perhaps in a relentless dissatisfaction with the quality of life we are leading: perhaps in a late-night discovery that the certainties for which we live and die are not so certain after all. The call of Jesus Christ comes, I believe, to each and though the sense of it is as different as we are, the essence is always to let go, to loosen our grip, to lay down nets and follow.

For some that may mean radical departure: letting go of job, life style, and moving on to another place. But for most it is not a matter of radical displacement, but internal change. We are called, someone observed, not to imitate Jesus, not to be carbon copy disciples, but to follow him with integrity where we are. What we may have ~~to let~~ go are old patterns, old habits, old ways of living and relating in order to move into the new life. For some it will mean letting go of controlling, manipulating behavior in our marriages, our families, our vocations, and adopting a new, open, and loving posture.

For all of us, to hear the call of Christ, to let go, will mean a conversion at the deepest level of the soul. Spiritually, we are most uncomfortable with the thought of not being in control, predictable, secure. But it is precisely to this new open handed faith that our Lord calls us. At a level so deep we are uncomfortable even discussing it, we are called to trust him: to trust Jesus Christ with our future, our welfare, our happiness. At the deepest level of the soul we are called to let go.

The promise is that when we let go of all that is impermanent, temporary, and nonessential, we will encounter that which is ultimately real, permanent, eternal, namely the love of God. The promise is that when we let go, we are held in arms that are everlasting. Amen.

The good news is that when Abraham trusted, God provided. The good news is that the Gospel is not finally all sacrifice and grim self denial, but warmth and joy and life abundant; life overflowing with goodness and affection and happiness and peace.

The good news is that Abraham and Isaac came down from the mountain and lived out the rest of their lives as an extraordinary father and son. The good news is that once Abraham learned the difficult lesson and loosened his grip on his son a bit, he was given him back, and loved him more, and appreciated and enjoyed him more than he ever thought possible - not as a possession from which Abraham had to squeeze his salvation, but as a gift.

The good news is a great mystery. It is that when we have mustered the courage to stand alone and commit everything to Jesus Christ, he gives back what we need: and we reclaim the life we have dedicated, the tasks, the goals, and the dear relationships, the parents, spouses, children, brothers, sisters, friends - who are now, by God's good grace, infinitely more precious than ever before.

The good news is finally a great mystery which we can't explain, but only witness; namely that in losing life we find it: in loosening our tight grip on things, we begin to see their true meaning; in releasing what sometimes can be a suffocating grip on other people - we begin to know their precious and infinite value.

The good news is that when we give everything we have, everything we are to God - what we get back is our salvation. Amen.